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MACOMB COUNTY

Child's last words: 'Mama, don't! Don't do it!'

Question not if mom killed, but why

September 6, 2007

BY AMBER HUNT

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Ashley Kukla screamed as she hid beneath the kitchen table.

The 5-year-old was bleeding. Her mother had stabbed her. And when 8-year-old Alexandra tried to protect her little sister, the butcher knife was turned on her as Ashley screamed, "Mama, don't! Don't do it!"

Advertisement

Jennifer Kukla repeatedly stabbed Alexandra in the throat, nearly severing her head. Then she grabbed Ashley, stabbed her to death and dragged her body into a bedroom to lie alongside her sister.

That's how lawyers on both sides describe the girls' final moments, based on Jennifer Kukla's interviews with police.

The opening statements Wednesday in the trial against Kukla, a 30-year-old Macomb Township woman accused in the Feb. 4 slayings of her two daughters, were gruesome and dramatic. Many of the jurors shifted in their seats and covered their mouths as lawyers described the deaths.

The case isn't a matter of what happened, lawyers said. It's a matter of why it happened.

Kukla's lawyer said it's because she was insane. Prosecutors argue that while Kukla was mentally ill, she knew right from wrong.

In court, Kukla grasped the neck of her blouse and hunched forward, her shoulders shaking as she sobbed during the first day of testimony. At some points, she covered her ears.

Defense lawyer Steve Freers said insanity is the only explanation for the slayings. Kukla heard voices that said someone was coming to torture the girls and rape them, he said. She wanted to protect them.

But Macomb County Assistant Prosecutor Bill Cataldo said Kukla was able to ignore one of the alleged voices' commands: to kill herself. After she'd killed her children, the family dogs and a pet mouse, she dressed herself and sat in the living room.

"Sometimes, a cigar is just a cigar," Cataldo said, quoting psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. "Don't look for something that isn't there. Sometimes, a murder is just a murder."

Saying that someone hears voices is a sophisticated defense, he added: "How can you prove it?"

Freers said Kukla was disoriented that morning. She'd thought it was a school day and had dressed the children, he said. She heard voices saying that she should kill them, but she fought back as she led them outside to go to school.

"She takes her kids back in the house," Freers told the jury. "She hears, 'They're coming. They're coming. They're coming.'"

Then she grabbed the butcher knife.

After she killed the girls, Freers said, she disemboweled her dogs for fear they'd eat Ashley and Alexandra.

Macomb County Medical Examiner Daniel Spitz said each of the girls was stabbed four times. Ashley was found on a mattress in a back bedroom of the family's mobile home. Alexandra was sprawled on top of a sleeping bag on the floor.

<http://www.printthis.clickability.com/pt/cpt?action=cpt&title=MACOMB+COUNTY%3A+Child%27s+las...> 9/6/2007

He said the girls showed no signs of abuse. They appeared to have been dead for at least 12 hours by the time he examined them at 10:30 p.m. Feb. 4.

Jurors won't see pictures of the girls. Lawyers on both sides said that might prejudice the case. They will, however, hear Kukla's taped statements to police, whom she told that she was headed for hell.

"She said ... there was a special place in hell for people like her," testified Macomb County Sheriff's Sgt. Lori Misch.

Testimony is to resume today before Circuit Judge Edward Servitto.

Contact **AMBER HUNT** at 586-469-4682 or alhunt@freepress.com.

Find this article at:

<http://www.freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070906/NEWS04/709060380/1006>

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MOUNT CLEMENS -- Jennifer Kukla was standing calmly in the doorway of her mobile home, smoking a cigarette, when police arrived to discover a scene of "horrific" carnage inside, according to testimony Wednesday in her murder trial.

Blood was spattered in the kitchen, the family's three dogs lay dead in a crate and the bodies of Kukla's two young daughters -- Alexandra, 8, and Ashley, 5 -- lay in a back bedroom, their throats slashed.

"She (said she) was going to hell because she just killed her kids," testified Macomb Sheriff Sgt. Lori Misch, one of the first officers to meet Kukla after Kukla's sister had called 911. "She said there was a special place in hell for people like her."

Kukla is charged with two counts of first-degree murder for stabbing the girls Feb. 4, authorities say.

Just before she was killed, Ashley cowered under a table, bleeding from a stab wound, saying, "Momma, don't, momma, don't, let me go, momma, let me go, momma," " William Cataldo, chief of the Macomb County Prosecutor's Office, told jurors.

Kukla and family members in the courtroom sobbed during the testimony.

Cataldo called the killings a "horrific, senseless, cold-blooded murder of two defenseless children."

"Jennifer Kukla is mentally ill. Jennifer Kukla is not insane," said Cataldo. "She is charged with killing those two children. She was mentally ill."

Kukla, 30, was a single mother and an assistant manager at a Macomb Township McDonald's. While three psychologists ruled that she was insane, it is a point the prosecution disputes. They contend that she is not mentally ill because she had the capacity to work at her job, attempt to solve problems around her home and plan to kill her children.

Cataldo said that after spending a night pretending that she was camping with her kids, Kukla heard voices in her head telling her to "kill those children, kill yourself," and that she "made the choice" to get a butcher's knife.

Using a retractable pointer as a knife, Cataldo demonstrated in court how Kukla chased and attacked her children.

She grabbed Ashley and stabbed her in the throat, Cataldo said. Alexandra tried to push her sister out of the way, and then became the focus of her mom's attack.

Defense attorney Steven Freers contends his client was insane. "When all the evidence is in, the only thing that will make sense is that she is insane," Freers said. "You will hear her statements that the voices told her 'they were coming, they were coming, they are coming and they will kill her children.' There is no premeditation."

Misch testified that she and other deputies were summoned to the trailer when Kukla's sister called 911. Misch said Kukla told her what happened in the home.

You can reach Edward L. Cardenas at (586) 468-0529 or ecardenas@detnews.com.

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'She knows the difference between right and wrong'

Prosecutor rejects insanity for mom who stabbed girls

By Jameson Cook
Macomb Daily Staff Writer

A girl who cleaned Jennifer Kukla's trailer the night before she killed her two daughters said Kukla was fretting about social services workers taking away her children, a police officer testified Wednesday.

Jessica Degg, 16, told sheriff's Detective Sgt. Pam McLean that she and a friend, Russell Rucker, were hired by Kukla's sister to clean Kukla's trailer the night of Feb. 3, to try to ward off Child Protective Services removing her two young daughters from her home.

"She said she (Kukla) appeared sad and was worried about what would happen to her two children," McLean testified Degg told her. "She said she (Kukla) was hearing voices but she didn't say what the voices were saying."

Kukla also told Degg that "she was hypnotized as a child and did bad things and her family is trying to get her for doing the bad things," MacLean said in court.

McLean was the last witness to testify Wednesday in Kukla's trial in Macomb County Circuit Court for the stabbing deaths of her two daughters, Alexandra, 8, and Ashley, 5, about 7:30 a.m. Sunday, Feb. 4, in her trailer between Hall and 21 Mile Road, near Card Road, in Macomb Township.

The trial is scheduled to continue this morning in front of Judge Edward Servitto in the downtown Mount Clemens courthouse.

In her confession to police, Kukla said she killed her daughters because "evil voices" told her to do so and to protect them from something she could not identify.

Macomb County prosecutors are asking the jury to find her guilty but mentally ill of two counts of first-degree premeditated murder in which she would be confined to prison for the rest of her life and receive added mental treatment.

"Jennifer Kukla is mentally ill; Jennifer Kukla is not insane," assistant Macomb prosecutor William Cataldo told jurors in his opening statement Wednesday morning. "She knows the difference between right and wrong. She knew when she murdered those kids something would happen."

The defense is claiming insanity, and if the jury agrees, she will be ordered to a psychiatric center for an indefinite period.

During his statement, Cataldo dramatically acted out and emotionally verbalized the brutal killing scene, using a pointer to depict a knife being stabbed into the necks of Alexandra and Ashley, and quoting Alexandra, "Mama, don't. Mama don't. Let me go, mama."

The explosive portrayal brought gasps in the courtroom and sobs from Kukla at the defense table and her family members sitting in the audience.

Cataldo implied Kukla planned the killings to keep Child Protective Services from taking away her children as it had done once before because of inhabitable living conditions. There

was no evidence of prior physical abuse.

"Her home is a mess, she is afraid Child Protective Services will come in and swoop her children," Cataldo said.

Kukla was on a downward spiral in her life because she was a poor single mother and could not provide a good home, attorneys said. The water didn't work and the furnace had been broken, though it had been recently fixed. Cataldo said she also had a drinking problem.

Kukla told a female friend the day before the killings that her two daughters often made her late for her job as an assistant manager at a McDonald's, and she had been called by her employer and told not to come in that day.

"I'm going to kill those girls if they make me tardy for work again," Cataldo said, repeating a remark Kukla told the woman.

Cataldo pointed out that Kukla said to police in a statement shortly after the incident, "Don't have children. You should never have children."

Defense attorney Steven Freers countered in his opening statement that three psychiatrists -- only one commissioned by the defense -- agree that Kukla was insane when she killed her daughters.

"It doesn't really make sense for someone to kill children to protect them," Freers said. "The only thing that will make sense is that she's insane."

On top of killing her children, Freers pointed out Kukla knifed to death one adult dog and two puppies that were in a kennel cage in the living room, and a pet white mouse that was in an aquarium near the dog cage.

"She thought the children would be tortured, raped and eaten alive," Freers said.

Cataldo advised jurors to be skeptical about experts' opinions.

"You do not have to believe an expert's opinion," he said. "You can choose to accept it or not to accept it."

The psychiatrists are expected to say that Kukla suffered a psychological breakdown that amounted to a lack of criminal responsibility, or ability to know right from wrong.

Cataldo argued that Kukla can't pick and choose her insanity depending on the day.

"Insanity isn't an off-and-on switch," he said. "You can't turn it on one day and off the next day."

Cataldo noted that when Kukla was arrested, she appeared in her right mind.

Sgt. Lori Misch testified Wednesday that she was the first police officer to approach Kukla after her sister, Lauren Russell, called police about 11 hours after the slayings.

"She (Kukla) was calm, she was not crying," Misch said on the stand.

Kukla told her "she was going to hell because she had killed her kids," Misch testified. "She said she was going to the deepest pits of hell and said there's a special place for people like her."

The night before the killings, Kukla and her daughters slept in the 9-by-9-foot bedroom that would be the girls' final resting place, pretending they were camping.

Sunday morning, Kukla thought it was a school day and dressed the girls in warm clothes and winter coats, and even had them walk a short distance outside the trailer, according to her confession.

But then she followed the commands of her "voices" and first tried to stab Ashley, who ran from the bedroom as Alexandra intervened. Kukla stabbed Alexandra in the bedroom. Kukla found Ashley on the other side of the single-wide trailer, hiding under the kitchen table, where she pleaded with Kukla, "Mama, don't do it mama," before Kukla stabbed her, reports show.

The girls' bodies were found in the bedroom, with Alexandra's found on the floor next to a mattress where Ashley was located. Alexandra's foot laid across her sister's shoulder and chest area, according to testimony. Witnesses testified to seeing a large amount of blood in the room.

The palm side of Alexandra's finger showed a defensive wound that Dr. Daniel Spitz, chief county medical examiner, said indicated that she tried to grab the butcher knife from her mother.

Police found the knife, 8 to 9 inches long, in the bedroom.

Each child suffered four stab wounds to the neck.

The force of Ashley's wound was so hard that the knife also "actually cut through the spinal column," Spitz testified.

Deputy Ronald Murphy, an evidence technician, testified that blood spattering was found on the bedroom ceiling from Kukla pulling the knife back in a motion to stab again.

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Article published Sep 6, 2007

Battle Creek man faces charges in boy's death

Trace Christenson

The Enquirer

A Battle Creek man was charged Wednesday with murder, the third time he has been arraigned in the same case.

Adam Markos, 24, was arraigned in Calhoun County District Court on charges of open murder and child abuse in the death of his girlfriend's son.

The child, Dominic Munoz, 4, died Aug. 5. Battle Creek police have alleged he died from head injuries.

Markos was charged with abuse Aug. 8, but that charge was dismissed Aug. 23 and Markos was charged with murder the next day.

On Tuesday, District Court Judge Samuel Durham dismissed the murder charge against Markos after prosecutors said they were not prepared to begin the preliminary examination, scheduled for Wednesday afternoon.

A new warrant was prepared within hours and Markos never left the county jail. He was back in court at 1:30 p.m. Wednesday, as the child's mother, Lynn Wozniak and several of her friends watched.

Magistrate Roger Graves ordered Markos held without bond and scheduled a new preliminary examination for Sept. 17.

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Article published Sep 5, 2007
Delays abound in Adam Markos murder case
The Enquirer

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Magistrate Roger Graves ordered Markos held without bond and scheduled a new preliminary examination for Sept. 17.

At the hearing Tuesday, J. Thomas Schaeffer, Markos' attorney, complained his client was being denied his day in court.

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Article published Sep 6, 2007
Father charged with child abuse
Trace Christenson
The Enquirer

The father of an 8-week-old boy is in jail today after police allege he shook the child Sunday.

Karl Moyer, 22, of Marshall is charged with first-degree child abuse related to injuries sustained by his son, Emmanuel Moyer.

The child, born July 10 to Moyer's girlfriend, was reported in critical condition Wednesday at Bronson Methodist Hospital in Kalamazoo.

The infant was injured Saturday between 5:30 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. at Spruce Tree Mobile Home Park, just outside Marshall at 14200 181/2-Mile Road in Marengo Township while Moyer was caring for him, officers of the Calhoun County Sheriff's Department said.

Karl Moyer first took the child to the nearby home of his girlfriend's mother and then to Oaklawn Hospital in Marshall.

The child was then transferred to Bronson Methodist Hospital in Kalamazoo, where doctors determined the injuries came from someone shaking the child and notified authorities Sunday.

Lt. Steve Eddy of the sheriff's department said following an investigation, Moyer was arrested Monday.

At his arraignment Tuesday, Moyer was ordered to appear for a preliminary examination on Sept. 17 and his bond was set at \$50,000.

If convicted, he faces up to 15 years in prison. Moyer also is charged with being an habitual offender because of a Feb. 7 resisting and obstructing conviction. That would increase his maximum sentence by 7 1/2 years.

According to records from the Michigan Department of Corrections, Moyer also has convictions in Hillsdale County for breaking and entering in 2005 and fourth-degree criminal sexual conduct in 2003 in Calhoun County.

Trace Christenson can be reached at 966-0685 or tchrist@battlecr.gannett.com.

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Article published Sep 5, 2007
Man arrested for allegedly shaking baby
The Enquirer

MARENGO TOWNSHIP — A Tekonsha man has been charged with first degree child abuse after he allegedly shook his 7-week-old child on Sunday here.

Karl Moyer, 22, was arraigned in 10th District Court and is being held at the Calhoun County Jail. Bond has been set at \$50,000.

The child currently is in critical condition at Bronson Methodist Hospital, police said.

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Article published Sep 6, 2007

Murder charge dropped against Salem mother

By James Mitchell
EDITOR

Prosecutors and defense attorneys agreed that, in the best interests of a child, Salem Township resident Lori Gayle Knop will not be charged with the attempted murder of her 6-year-old son.

Knop entered a guilty plea Thursday in Washtenaw County Circuit Court to a felony charge of arson and a misdemeanor count of fourth-degree child abuse. Dismissed under an agreement between the prosecutor's office and defense attorney Tom Cranmer was the charge of attempted murder. Knop will be sentenced Sept. 27; felony arson of a dwelling house carries a prison term of five to 20 years.

The sentencing will close the case initiated in October 2006, when Knop set fire to the Salem Township home she shared with her then-6-year-old son. Prosecutors argued at the time that Knop's intention was to murder her son.

In court last week, defense attorney Cranmer, of Miller, Canfield, Paddock and Stone, said Knop explained her intentions to the judge.

"What she was really attempting to do was commit suicide so she could go to heaven," Cranmer said. "It's always a difficult circumstance when someone finds herself in that desperate of a situation where the only perceived out is to take your own life."

Steve Hiller, deputy chief prosecutor for Washtenaw County, said the agreement was acceptable given his priority of ensuring the safety of the child.

"It was appropriate," Hiller said. "There was consideration given to the well-being of the child victim, and the fact that he would not be forced to testify."

The agreement, the specifics of which Hiller would not reveal, was tailored to protect both the public and the victim from the defendant. Cranmer said a hearing remains to be scheduled to determine if Knop's parental rights will be vacated by the state.

The charge of attempted murder was based on testimony from witnesses, Knop and the victim at the time of the Oct. 20, 2006, fire. Neighbors reported seeing the blaze in a home north of Six Mile Road. Responding fire and police officials searched for Knop and her son, who were later located in the basement of a neighbors house and were taken to a hospital for treatment.

Prosecutors believed that Knop set fire to the house intending to both murder her son and commit suicide, but changed her mind and took the boy from the home and hid in a nearby basement.

Prior to last week's plea, Knop underwent lengthy forensic psychology tests to ensure that she was capable of participating in her own defense.

"It's a good resolution for everybody," Hiller said. "There are protective proceedings pending in the family court. The fact that it's a guilty plea [for child abuse] will be significant."

Cranmer agreed, and said that the agreement was the result of cooperation with the prosecutor.

"Fortunately, before anything tragic happened, she decided not to go through with the suicide plan," Cranmer said.

Contact South Lyon Herald editor James Mitchell at jamitchell@gannett.com or at (248) 437-2011.



Arraignment postponed for former counselor

POLICE BLOTTER

GRAND BLANC TOWNSHIP

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Wednesday, September 05, 2007

By Sally York

Journal Staff Writer

GRAND BLANC - A judge in Keweenaw County Circuit Court has postponed the arraignment of former Grand Blanc West Middle School counselor Arthur McGuff until a motion to dismiss one charge is considered.

McGuff, 47, was arrested June 29 in Copper Harbor in the Upper Peninsula after leading police on a 40-mile chase. Police said his wife had gotten out of the van in Hancock and called them to report he was driving under the influence of cocaine. Police said she told them there were six children in the van, ages 3 to 14.

McGuff's attorney, Nicholas Daavettila of Houghton, asked the judge to dismiss a charge of second-degree child abuse, the court clerk said.

McGuff was set to be arraigned Tuesday on a misdemeanor charge of operating while intoxicated and three felony charges: fleeing police, possession of cocaine and child abuse.

A new date for the arraignment has not been set yet, the clerk said.

- Sally York

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Article published Sep 6, 2007

EDITORIAL

Important to ensure infants have safe sleep environment

We like to think that there is nowhere safer and more secure for our children than sound asleep in their own beds.

But it isn't always so. Every year, dozens of infants in Michigan die because of factors related to an unsafe sleep environment.

That is why Gov. Jennifer Granholm has declared September as Infant Safe Sleep Month to remind parents, grandparents and other caregivers to always take precautions when putting infants to bed.

According to the Michigan Department of Human Services, that includes having a baby sleep alone in a crib that is safety approved and has a firm mattress with a tightly fitted sheet. As tempting as it might be, *don't* place any soft objects, blankets or bumper pads in the crib with the child. If you are worried about the baby getting cold, make sure to use warm sleep clothes rather than blankets.

It is important that babies sleep on their backs with nothing covering their faces. Studies have shown that sleeping on their backs greatly reduces the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). Infants also should sleep in a smoke-free environment.

Some of these recommendations go against common practices of a generation or two ago, and may be counter to our desire to make a baby's bed "cozy." But while plush, fuzzy objects may feel soft to the touch, they can pose a danger of suffocation for a young child not yet able to raise its head or roll over.

Statistics from the Michigan Child Death State Advisory Team underscore the importance of the DHS's recommendations. The advisory team reviewed 253 infant deaths in 2002 and 2003 and studied the sleeping environments. The team found that 84 percent of the infants were not sleeping in cribs, and 48 percent were in soft or heavy bedding. Just over half - 52 percent - were sharing their sleeping space with one or more persons.

The 253 infant deaths included 105 from SIDS, and of those, only 32 percent were sleeping on their backs.

In July alone, five deaths were reported in Wayne County of babies who were sleeping in their parents' beds.

These deaths were not intentional, nor were they the result of reckless behavior or abuse. But some of them may have been prevented had the babies been provided with safe sleeping environments.

If there is an infant in your family or neighborhood, make sure that the caregivers are aware of the need to put their babies to bed safely. Everyone will rest better, and you may help prevent devastating heartbreak for a family.

Article published Sep 6, 2007

Hometownlife.com

CARE House seeks people who care

Jim Ragold of Birmingham began volunteering for the Child Abuse and Neglect Council of Oakland County more than a year ago as a child assistant, a far cry from his job with a software company.

He now devotes 10-12 hours a month, greeting the children and helping make them feel more comfortable when they first come to CARE House, the location of Child Abuse and Neglect Council. The organization is seeking more willing volunteers like Ragold to work in its various programs.

On Tuesday, Sept. 11, CARE House is holding an open house, Volunteer Call for Action Day, from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. to recruit additional volunteers to work with children and families. It is an open house and interested individuals can drop in anytime during those hours. The organization is also holding a Seeds of Hope Tour Luncheon that day from noon to 1 p.m. There is no charge to attend, but reservations for Seeds of Hope are requested.

The Volunteer Call for Action Day will be held at CARE House, 44765 Woodward, north of Square Lake Road in Pontiac.

The Council is seeking volunteers who are empathetic, patient, good listeners and would enjoy working in the following areas:

- n Child Assistants
- n Family Support
- n Nurturing Program
- n Volunteer Advocates for Children
- n Development Office
- n Healthy Start Nurturing Program and Baby Pantry
- n Office Support

At CARE House, the Council works closely with area law enforcement, judicial and social services agencies to ease the children through the unfamiliar process that may follow allegations of abuse or neglect. They are boys and girls of all ages, who may have been hurt by someone they knew and loved, or sometimes by an acquaintance. Social workers at CARE House interview the youngsters, while law enforcement officers and other relevant individuals observe from another room, thereby cutting down on the number of times a child is forced to retell the details of the abuse.

CARE House provides support and guidance to those youngsters who need to go through the court system and helps children on the road to emotional and physical recovery. Additionally, it

provides intervention and prevention programming to families, through education, nurturing programs and family support.

"Our volunteers are extraordinary individuals who enable us to provide the quality services and programs that help so many children and families in the community," said Laurie Walters, the director of volunteers. "They enhance everything we do here, from greeting the children when they enter our doors and working with our staff in our nurturing programs, to supporting children through the court system and other vital programs. Our volunteers give of their time, hearts and expertise to help build up the trust that the children and their families may have lost and allowing them to feel safe again."

Volunteers receive training and inservice.

Individuals who are interested in the Child Abuse and Neglect Council's volunteer program are invited to call CARE House prior to Sept. 11, or just attend anytime between 11 a.m. and 6 p.m. on Volunteer Call for Action Day. Those who wish to participate in the Seeds of Hope Tour & Luncheon should call (248) 332-7173 to make a reservation.



Expert advice on how to land the best child care

Tuesday, July 31, 2007

RUTH MANCINA

SAGINAW VALLEY FAMILY MAGAZINE

When Natasha Coulouris had her first child a year ago, she had already spent hours researching child care facilities, interviewing providers, and talking to as many other moms as she could.

To Coulouris and her husband, Andy, finding just the right baby-sitter for Alexandra, who turns 1 on Tuesday, Aug. 7, was critical.

"It's one of the most important decisions you will make as a parent," said Coulouris, who is Director and Health Officer of the Saginaw County Department of Public Health.

Asking lots of questions like Coulouris did is a step in the right direction in finding quality child care, said Tricia Weinecke, Services Specialist for Saginaw Intermediate School District and Saginaw Valley Regional Community Coordinated Child Care.

"It's OK to be picky," said Weinecke, adding that her office provides parents with a checklist of steps to take when choosing a child care provider, which includes questions to ask.

"Ask if you can visit anytime and if they say no then a red flag should go up," she said.

Saginaw Valley Regional 4C is a non-profit agency that helps parents find available, licensed child care providers in Saginaw, Bay and Arenac counties.

The agency also provides training and workshops for home day care and center providers.

Some of the things parents should ask about include cost, hours of operation, how many children does the provider care for, and who will be involved in the care of your child.

Parents also should ask such things as:

When and where diapers are changed

How the provider handles discipline

If it's a home setting, who else is living in the home, and if there are pets or smoking in the home

Where do the children take naps?

Can I see a copy of your license?

Can I see a copy of your CPR certification?

The more questions parents ask, the more likely they will be able to determine if the home or center they are looking at really provides quality child care, Weinecke advised.

The agency also helps parents understand the differences between home child care and child care centers. Deciding which type of child care provider to use is a matter of personal preference, she added. "We tell parents to be open minded and that there are benefits to both."

In addition to asking as many questions as possible, observing how the child care provider interacts with the other children also is very important.

Dropping by unannounced can help parents really get a feel for a home or center and how it operates, Weinecke said.

"That's the best thing you can do," she said, adding that if the child care provider does not like unannounced visits, that is another warning sign parents should look for.

Coulouris agrees observing each provider was equally important to all the research she did when she and her husband made their decision about where Alexandra would go.

"You cannot replace the feeling of a place," she said. "When we walked in, we said that's it. We got the feeling that the people there wanted to be there and really loved children."

The center's open door policy, professionalism, and their efforts to keep her connected to everything Alexandra does during the day has really impressed Coulouris.

"She really is so happy there," Coulouris said. "It's a great environment and I feel blessed."

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KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Early childhood report shows areas of need

Thursday, September 06, 2007

It has been estimated that for every dollar a community spends on early childhood programs, the return on that investment is between \$3 and \$17.

That's because money invested in children on the front end means less money spent later on physical and mental health problems, remedial education, foster care, welfare and incarceration.

That's one message the Great Start Collaborative is trying to send in its report to the community on the state of young children and families in Kalamazoo County.

This morning, the Collaborative -- Kalamazoo Regional Educational Service Agency, working with the Greater Kalamazoo United Way and the state Early Childhood Investment Corporation -- was to have presented the results of its first report at a breakfast meeting with area business leaders.

There was good news in the report. Thanks to the now-defunct Healthy Futures initiative, the percentage of children in Kalamazoo County who are immunized has grown throughout the decade. The number of children with health insurance is increasing, thanks to Medicaid and the MiChild insurance program. The number of children in foster care is declining.

But the number of children aged 6 and under who have been abused or neglected skyrocketed between 2005 and 2006, nearly doubling.

The number of nights in homeless or domestic assault shelters increased by 24 percent between 2005 and 2006. Medicaid paid for 43 percent of all births in Kalamazoo County in 2004. Thirteen percent of children under the age of 5 live in poverty. Black infant mortality was 21 percent in 2004. That year, 10 percent of births were to teen mothers.

So what happens now? Do we now have yet another study to put on the shelf with the hundreds of other studies this community is famous for generating and failing to act on?

Those working on the Great Start Collaborative hope the next step is devising a strategy that can better coordinate existing early childhood programs into a more seamless whole.

They'll need to motivate the community to act in many ways, large and small.

That's a task they started today.

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Wednesday, September 05, 200

Grandparents run-around

Voice: Denise Kuhn, Bay City

I have a question to ask the Prosecutor's Office that handles Friend of The Court actions.

I have been trying for the past several months to ask the Prosecutor's Office if they can go after the mothers who do not have custody of their children. I have been getting the run-around for the past couple of months; no one is returning calls that I make to them. And when I call, they always give me a poor excuse: They have files they are working on.

But now can you or someone tell me why you do not waste any time going after the fathers? If the grandparents are out here taking care of their grandchildren, why do you at the Prosecutors Office give them the run-around and a difficult time? They are just like parents raising them. The grandparents are taking a big responsibility taking on the grandkids, but we love every minute of it. The kids keep the grandparents going, knowing that they are safe in their home instead of not knowing where they are and how they are these days in the foster care system. Grandparents keep the family ties together for them and show the love they have for the kids. But you treat the grandparents like they are nothing. Why?

The parents of these kids should be shown the responsibility of taking care of their children. Would this not be like if us, the parents, had to pay and take responsibility of our kids if they were not in our care? Or did the law change lately? Can someone answer this for me? It is a shame when the grandparents have to go to the House of Representatives on your office and to the governor's office.

Grandparents are not being treated fairly these days. We would like to know why. We are people trying to do what is best for the grandchildren.

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The Daily Telegram

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THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 6, 2007 Last modified: *Wednesday, September 5, 2007 4:27 PM EDT*

Driver accused of fleeing

James Randall Byrd, 39, was eastbound on M-50 when the deputy tried to pull him over, according to a report released Tuesday.

From staff reports

RIDGEWAY TWP. — A Lenawee County sheriff's deputy arrested a Beaverton man Friday on an outstanding warrant and is seeking a fleeing and eluding charge after the man did not pull over for about four miles along M-50.

James Randall Byrd, 39, was eastbound on M-50 when the deputy tried to pull him over, according to a report released Tuesday. The deputy had heard a report of a possible drunken driver in a pickup with a mattress in the bed, and saw the suspect vehicle drifting in the eastbound lane and crossing the centerline of M-50 near Hoagland Highway. The deputy turned on his emergency lights near Downing Highway, but Byrd did not pull over. The deputy used his siren and air horn to get Byrd's attention, then drove in the middle of the road so that Byrd could see him in his side mirror, but Byrd did not pull over until he was just west of Dennison Road in Monroe County.

While the deputy was taking Byrd into custody, a 24-ounce beer can spilled from the pickup, the deputy reported. Byrd told him he couldn't see the deputy's car because of the furniture in the pickup's bed and he was on the phone. Byrd also said he is a diabetic and suggested that affected his driving but refused medical treatment. The deputy administered one field sobriety test, which did not show intoxication. Byrd refused to take a preliminary breath test, and the deputy put him under arrest for operating while intoxicated and told Byrd he would be seeking a fleeing and eluding charge.

Byrd then said he felt his blood-sugar level dropping and asked for treatment. Paramedics from Monroe Community Ambulance checked his diabetic blood level, finding it scored a 78 with a normal value being 80 to 180, according to the report. They said there was no reason for Byrd to receive treatment at a hospital.

A breath test 75 minutes after the traffic stop at the Lenawee County Jail showed Byrd's blood-alcohol level at 0.002, police said. The deputy cited him for refusing the preliminary breath test and having open intoxicants in the pickup, but not for operating while intoxicated.

A records check showed Byrd was wanted by Jackson County authorities for not paying \$15,631 in child support, according to the report.

-- CLOSE WINDOW--



Second Coopersville teen sentenced in hazing case

Thursday, September 06, 2007

The Grand Rapids Press

WEST OLIVE -- A Coopersville teen who took part in the hazing of other teens in April and May was sentenced in Ottawa County Family Court to a minimum of six months of probation and 26 hours of community service.

Zane Schaefer, 16, pleaded no contest last week to two counts of gross indecency among males and was sentenced by juvenile court Referee Barb Forman.

Schaefer is the second of four former Coopersville High School students -- all former members of the junior varsity baseball team -- to enter a plea in the incident.

Robert Miller and Joshua Schoenborn are awaiting trial, facing the same charge as Schaefer. Scott Bush, 15, earlier was sentenced to six months of probation and 14 hours of community service.

School officials said five students on the baseball team reported being victims.

The teens charged were expelled from school, but may reapply for admission in the 2008-09 school year.

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August 6, 2007

More troubled teens

A 15-year-old Milford boy could face charges of possessing drug paraphernalia and obstructing police following a traffic stop early Tuesday morning. Police pulled over a vehicle around 4:20 a.m. near GM and Milford roads for not having a license plate and spotting the driver cut through a gas station lot. Police said the 15-year-old, a passenger in the car, turned over to them two bongs and admitted he had been smoking marijuana earlier. Police said he initially gave them a false date of birth, claiming to be 11 years old.

Police determined the teen was supposed to have been on a tether, due to a prior conviction. Also, he had been reported as a runaway, as was a 14-year-old Highland girl who was sleeping in the back seat of the car. The two teens were released to their parents, and a report was to be sent to juvenile court on the 15-year-old. The driver, an 18-year-old from Commerce, was ticketed for avoiding a traffic control device and violating the child restraint law. Police said they will send information on the incident to the county probation office, since the driver is on probation for fleeing and eluding.

A vehicle search turned up two hunting knives and three rocket fireworks, according to reports.

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Article published Sep 6, 2007

Replica gun, suspects found after armed robbery of \$6

A 46-year-old Pontiac man was robbed of about \$6 Saturday night in Redford Township by four youths, one of whom was carrying what looked like a pistol.

When police arrested four teenaged suspects a few minutes later, a plastic replica gun was found near them.

The robbery occurred about 11:30 p.m. near the Rouge Creek Apartments on Five Mile, according to a Redford Police Department report.

The robbers approached the victim from behind, the report said. The victim told police he was uncertain whether the gun carried by the tallest robber was real, but didn't want to take a chance, police said.

After taking the money, the victim said, the robbers fled eastward, behind the Royal Order of Moose lodge.

Police found the suspects on Wormer Street north of Midland. They range in age from 13 to 19. Two were from Detroit, one was from Redford and one was from Dearborn.

Police found \$7 cash between the four.

Young burglary suspects

Police arrested two boys, 11 and 12, shortly after witnesses saw them flee a house on Riverdale Street near Plymouth Road Monday afternoon.

Police were called about a burglary in progress; a woman living nearby had seen two people going into the rear of the house, police said. Witnesses, who identified the pair, also saw them flee, police said.

Police found a bathroom window open and plastic chairs stacked up under the window. Keys, a camera and a Nintendo Gameboy were reported stolen.

The boys were later turned over to their parents and could face charges in Wayne County Juvenile Court. None of the items reported stolen were recovered.

Phone stolen

A 16-year-old Redford boy who confronted two males over his stolen cellular phone Saturday evening was assaulted by a third person. He was not seriously hurt.

The theft occurred at Claude Allison Park after the teen dropped the phone. A witness pointed out people whom he said took the phone.

After catching up to them, in the area of Brady and Pickford streets, the victim was struck in the face and the back of the head, he said. He was unsure who had attacked him, he said.

The suspects fled east on Pickford.

Pipe, warrants arrest

A 44-year-old Novi woman was arrested on a drug paraphernalia charge and outstanding warrants during a traffic stop on Seven Mile near Grand River Monday morning.

A Redford officer spotted her about 11:30 a.m., driving a 1993 Nissan Sentra with a severely cracked windshield and a loud exhaust, a police report said. She was stopped nearby for the equipment violations.

During the stop, the woman reached for the glove compartment and the car's center console, police said. The officer got her out of the car and asked if she had any weapons, police said. She responded that she didn't, but the officer conducted a pat-down, and found a suspected crack cocaine pipe in a pocket,

police said.

Police also found 11 outstanding warrants for her, most from Detroit.

Rooftop party

Beer cans on the roof of the Wren Building, on Five Mile in central Redford, led to a house on nearby Student Street on Sunday.

There, a man told police he'd had a party at his house on Friday, and that some guests had gotten out of control and climbed onto the roof of the Wren Building. The man said he'd then ejected them from the party.

The beer cans were found Sunday by the Wren Building's owner. He checked back yards nearby, and found many cans of the same brand of beer in the back yard of the house on Student, he told police.

There was no reported damage to the roof. The building owner told police he wanted to document the incident.

Scavenging

Copper pipes, a kitchen faucet and cabinet knobs were reported stolen from a house on West Chicago near Telegraph on Friday.

The house's owner told police the theft occurred between Wednesday and Friday. Police said the front door had been forced open.

By Matt Jachman

LANSING

Suspected killer's life full of neglect, violence

Lansing man also got into crime early, records show

September 6, 2007

BY SUZETTE HACKNEY and JIM SCHAEFER

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS

By age 4, Matthew Macon's life already was spiraling.

An abusive father. A mother who looked the other way. Foster care and juvenile delinquency in his future.

Advertisement

The portrait of his home life depicted in Ingham County Court records is a grim one. Macon, 27, grew up hard.

He was arraigned Wednesday in one of five killings -- all in just more than four weeks -- a spree shocking not only for its ferocity, but because Macon was paroled from state prison just this June. Police also expect to charge him in the other four.

In 1983, at age 4, Macon lived in Lansing in a home with five siblings, according to records.

A neglect petition filed in court that year paints his father, Jim Henry Macon Jr., as a violent alcoholic who sexually assaulted one of his young stepdaughters in their home. It was unclear from court records whether charges were filed against the father, who could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

The petition also says that Earlene Macon, his wife, didn't initially report the assault.

Living in fear

Dozens of documents describe a 2 1/2 -year period in the early 1980s during which the Macon family was under court supervision. The children became wards of the court, and caseworkers filed regular updates on the family.

One document from a caseworker describes a night of terror, in which Jim Macon Jr. allegedly threatened to "kill everybody on Kalamazoo Street," including the caseworker monitoring his family.

"The mother and the minors are afraid to spend the night at their residence because they fear that Macon might return to further terrorize them," the caseworker wrote.

But it wasn't just that night. Over that 2 1/2 years, as the children shifted from their mother's custody to foster care and back, the state monitored the home, issuing a restraining order against the father. Even so, records say the father engaged in a fight with another man inside the home one night, and a gunshot was fired. All the children were home, but no one apparently was injured.

A caseworker wrote a letter to doctors treating Jim Macon Jr., informing them that he thought Macon was dangerous, that Macon had threatened him, and the caseworker asked to be told if Macon indicated any planned harm to the caseworker.

In 1985, Probate Judge Donald Owens wrote that "all available court treatment programs have been exhausted" regarding the Macon children and their parents. Further proceedings were dismissed.

A trip to Boys Town

From age 9, Matthew Macon's life was filled with criminal court appearances, foster homes, juvenile detention facilities and camps for incorrigible youth, petty crime -- he often broke into bike shops and stores -- and not-so-petty charges.

<http://www.printthis.clickability.com/pt/cpt?action=cpt&title=LANSING%3A+Suspected+killer%27s+life...> 9/6/2007

In 1989, a Lansing police detective petitioned the court to take permanent custody of young Macon. He was 10, but had had many run-ins with law enforcement. A caseworker recommended that Macon be placed out of the home "due to the circumstances of his life and lack of parental supervision."

In his court file, a caseworker wrote that the Macons were a "NOTORIOUS FAMILY."

A juvenile referee sent Macon to Boys Town, a home for at-risk youth in Nebraska, in April 1991. In May, his mother told caseworkers he was doing very well, that he was a leader at the home and he would be returning to Lansing for a visit in June. He was featured on the "Today" show, which ran a story about Boys Town.

But by October, at age 12, a Boys Town representative characterized Macon's behavior as "severe acting out -- anger is a problem." There was talk of him remaining at Boys Town until he was 18.

Sins of the past

In July 1993, a referee decided he could return to his mother's custody in Lansing the following month. Macon's return home would lead back to the juvenile justice system.

On Oct. 24, 1993, Macon, then 14, was accused of using a stick to sexually assault a girl younger than 13 in his mother's home.

But his lawyer, Mike O'Briant, said Wednesday that the crimes of Macon's youth shouldn't be held against him today.

"Just because he may have had a juvenile criminal record, it should not be presumed that he committed the charges against him," O'Briant said.

At Macon's preliminary examination in 1993, he admitted assaulting the girl.

The referee ruled that the offense was so serious that his release would endanger public safety. He was taken into the custody of the Ingham County Youth Center.

After undergoing a psychological evaluation, Macon was placed in a sexual-offender program in January 1994 at Camp Highfields in Onondaga. While at the camp, early reviews showed he seemed to be doing well and had become engaged in softball and basketball. Still, a caseworker noted that it was early in the treatment program.

Two times while at the camp, Macon admitted stealing cars, including an Oldsmobile custom wagon that belonged to the camp. Detroit police officers recovered the car in what then was known as the 12th Precinct.

In September 1994, Macon was placed in the W.J. Maxey Training School in Whitmore Lake. Ten months later, he went to live in a halfway house.

But his mother had had enough. She moved to Mississippi.

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This is a printer friendly version of an article from **Lansing State Journal**. To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

Published September 6, 2007



(Photo by Rod Sanford/Lansing State Journal)

In court: Family members and supporters of Matthew E. Macon sit in the front row in the courtroom Wednesday during his video arraignment on a murder charge in Lansing.

Related content from LSJ:

- [Missed Opportunity? Suspect arrested almost three weeks after alleged violation](#)

Macon's early life marked by violence, crime

Kevin Grasha
Lansing State Journal

By the time Matthew E. Macon pleaded guilty at age 14 to sexually assaulting a girl with a stick, he had seen a lot of violence.

Court documents reveal that Macon's father was violent and abusive. His older sister was placed in foster care in 1983 after her father was accused of sexually abusing her.

Then, by age 16, at a 1996 Ingham County juvenile court hearing, a court referee said although Macon was making progress in a program for sex offenders, he required "lifetime vigilance."

"Sexual offending - like an addiction," the court referee's notes from the hearing say about Macon.

Police say Macon killed at least six women. He was arraigned Wednesday on a murder charge in connection with the death of 64-year-old Sandra Eichorn on Aug. 27.

Macon's attorney, Mike O'Briant, would not comment on his client's past, citing a gag order. Family members said O'Briant instructed them not to make any further public statements.

Macon, who underwent years of court-ordered treatment for sexual offenders, never was charged

with a violent crime as an adult, according to court records. He lived in at least three homes for delinquent youths before he was 18.

It is known that at least one of the five recent homicide victims also was sexually assaulted with a stick. Police arrested Macon last week on charges including failing to update his address on a sex offender registry.

The vast majority of adolescents who commit sex offenses do not become sex offenders, serial rapists or even serial killers, said Dr. Bob Geffner, an expert on sexual assault, who is president of the Institute on Violence Abuse and Trauma at Alliant International University in San Diego.

Troubled path

The fact that Macon might have witnessed his older sister being sexually abused and with his history of acting out sexually, means Macon also might have been abused as a youth, Geffner said.

"If nobody dealt with the trauma, anger and hostility," Geffner said, "that increases the likelihood it will come out ... The anger becomes aggressive and turns outward."

Court records detail a troubled path after 1983.

Macon ran away from a foster care home in 1989. He was considered a "delinquent court ward."

Also in 1989, Macon was charged with breaking into a Lansing bike shop and a comic club. He pleaded guilty.

In 1992, he was sent to Boys Town, a facility in Nebraska for delinquent children.

In custody for years

He appeared in Ingham County juvenile court in November 1994 after escaping from Highfields, a home for juvenile offenders in Onondaga. He admitted to taking a car from the facility and, with a friend, breaking into a grocery store and stealing food, according to a plea agreement.

In May 1995, he was sent to W.J. Maxey Boys Training School, a facility for delinquent youth, ages 12 to 21, near Ann Arbor. It provides sexual offender treatment, according to the state Department of Human Services.

Macon remained at Maxey in the court's temporary custody through May 1996.

In October 1997, he completed a sex offender treatment program. Court records show that social workers believed the likelihood he would commit another sex offense was "very slim."

Contact Kevin Grasha at 267-1347 or kgrasha@lsj.com.

Food pantries step up in wake of government glitch

Published Wednesday, September 5, 2007 3:43:57 PM Central Time

By ERIC HJERSTEDT SHARP

Globe Staff Writer

September's distribution of the quarterly emergency food assistance program at Goegebic-Ontonagon Community Action Agency has been postponed.

The distribution glitch has Society of St. Vincent de Paul officials scrambling to take up the slack and feed area families in need.

According to GOCAA officials in Ironwood, they will not have the September assistance program distribution, "due to changes with the state."

"There is a problem with trucking the commodities here," said an GOCAA official who answered the phone Tuesday in Ironwood. "Other than that, we don't know what exactly is happening."

The next TEFAP distribution date will be announced in the Daily Globe, the official added.

Although the emergency food assistance program with GOCAA has been temporarily suspended, the three food shelves in Gogebic County have taken up the slack recently.

"The number of people calling us has almost doubled," said Julie Ahnen, manager of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul on U.S. 2 in Bessemer. "We usually get at last 15 to 20 people a week, depending on what part of the month it is."

Ahnen said the first and last part of each month are the food pantry's busiest days.

People who need food who have contacted the Michigan Department of Human Services in Bessemer and are at or below the federal poverty levels are welcome to come to any of the three Society of St. Vincent de Paul food pantries. Pantries are located in Bessemer, Ironwood and Watersmeet.

St. Vincent de Paul Food pantries in the county include:

--In Ironwood, the food pantry is located at the lower level of the Our Lady of Peace Parish Rectory, on South Marquette Street. Hours there are from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. For more information, phone 932-4325.

--In Bessemer, the food pantry is located on the north side of U.S. 2. Hours there are from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday, Wednesday and Thursday. For more information, phone 663-4436.

-- In Watersmeet, phone Kathy Stupak-Thrall, 630-220-4862.

Extra demand on the food resources have meant that more food is needed. As always, donations of food items are welcomed. Especially needed are canned foods such as soups, stews, vegetables and tomato sauce. Also needed are pancake mixes, peanut butter, jelly and jams, and cereals.



THE ANN ARBOR NEWS

Food Stamp Challenge starts Families try getting by on the average benefit

Thursday, September 06, 2007

News Staff Reporter

Jennifer and Lexi Chapin-Smith don't usually think so hard about every item they place in their grocery cart.

But then, they're usually not trying to buy a week's worth of groceries for \$42.

The Ann Arbor couple is among about 100 local families participating in this week's Michigan Food Stamp Challenge to spend only \$21 a week per person for food. That's the average benefit to food stamp recipients. The goal is to raise awareness of the challenges food stamp recipients face in light of fears that funding for the food stamp program will be cut.

"This won't be easy," Lexi said at the start of their shopping trip at the Carpenter Road Meijer store on Tuesday. "We try and eat healthy foods. Unfortunately, healthy food is more expensive."

List in hand, the two steered clear of the snack aisles, heading instead for a \$1.99 loaf of Meijer brand whole wheat bread.

"White is cheaper, but it does nothing for you nutritionally," said Jennifer.

Next, they picked up a \$1.79 jar of natural peanut butter and a tub of quick oats for \$1.69.

(They already have both at home, but this week they'll eat nothing they've already bought, except for salt.)

They debated buying one or two bags of black beans at \$1.09 and opted for one. They also decided two cans of tomato sauce will add spice to their dinners of beans and rice.

A half-price sale on Kraft cheese caused a cheer.

"Do they have extra sharp?" asked Lexi, knowing there's no extra charge for extra flavor. "Excellent! I budgeted \$5 for cheese, so you can get another one if you like."

The couple bought apples, raisins, eggs, yogurt, rice, a cucumber and spinach (not as good a value as the two-for-one field greens, but more nutrient-dense), and two heads of broccoli.

The idea from the start was to buy jelly so Jennifer's daily peanut butter sandwiches could be peanut butter and jelly sandwiches - if there was enough money. They figured there was, and chose a jar of light preserves.

As they headed for the cash register, they agreed their cart didn't look too different from their typical load, except they would have bought bigger sizes and soy milk and whole wheat tortillas instead of corn. They also would have added a big box of expensive Cheerios, some bulk candy, ice cream, cocoa and vanilla to the cart.

"There's definitely no junk food on this diet," said Jennifer.

When the bill came to \$45.92, the two looked at each other.

"We'll pretend we didn't get the jelly," Jennifer said.

The couple, who met at Northwestern University eight years ago and were married last year in a Quaker wedding in Maryland, each grew up with a single mother struggling to feed two children. Lexi's family received food stamps.

The federal farm bill, which includes funding for the Food Stamp Program, is due to be reauthorized in Congress this year. It's not clear at this point how language in the bill would affect funding for food stamps, said Matt Lahr, spokesman for U.S. Rep. Tim Walberg, R-Tipton, who represents parts of Washtenaw County. A version that passed the House would have increased funding, but other issues caused the bill to lose bipartisan support, and the Senate is now working on its own version, he said.

The Food Stamp Program is a federally regulated USDA program that was never intended to be the sole resource for a family's food supply, said Jane Marshall, executive director of the Food Bank Council of Michigan.

But she said that a family at the poverty level - which is \$20,000 or less for a family of four - doesn't have much discretionary money to spend on anything. The American Community Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that in 2005, 7.8 percent of Washtenaw County families were living below the poverty level. For individuals the figure was 13.9 percent.

Marshall said she recently got an e-mail from a woman who said she was relieved school was starting this week because at least her son would get one good meal a day.

"It really is a challenge," she said.

Meanwhile, after a day on their food stamp diet, Lexi Chapin-Smith said Wednesday the couple is doing "OK," although they didn't realize how much they'd miss spices, especially on the enchiladas they had Tuesday night. They also didn't buy vegetable oil, which means they may have to have a stir-steam dish later in the week as opposed to stir-fry.

Some Food Stamp Challenge participants will blog about their experience at www.michiganfoodstampchallenge.org.

Jo Mathis can be reached at jmathis@annarbornews.com or 734-994-6849.

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THE BAY CITY TIMES

Good Samaritan Rescue Mission to dedicate play area to teen who volunteered

Thursday, September 06, 2007

By **PATTI BRANDT**

TIMES WRITER

Stephanie Mielens was just 17 when the car she and her boyfriend, 18-year-old Andy VanDenBoom, were riding in was broadsided.

The two were headed out with family to celebrate the silver medal Mielens and a team of her Bay-Arenac ISD Career Center classmates had won for a project on homelessness at a state competition held that day.

Both were killed in the April 2005 accident, but on Saturday their families and friends, community members and the residents of the Good Samaritan Rescue Mission will dedicate a memorial to Mielens, who loved children and was a champion of teen volunteerism.

Stephanie's Playhaven, which includes a wooden playscape, a teeter-totter, picnic tables, benches and a brick patio, will be dedicated at 10:30 a.m. at the homeless shelter, 713 Ninth St. The public is invited to the event, which will be followed by a picnic lunch.

In a flower bed there is even a pair of boots that belonged to Mielens, from which pink geraniums now grow.

"It's wonderful," said mission resident Savannah Bourcier, mom to 2-year-old Hayden Mielke. "I was here before and I watched them build it, but I couldn't go out there. So this time around it's really awesome because I can bring him out here every night."

Mike Bowyer lives at the mission with his wife and daughter, 3-year-old Lacy Bowyer, in one of three intact family rooms that were recently opened.

"It's nice down here," Bowyer said. "It gives the children a chance to get outside and play around, get some fresh air."

The play area, which has been in use for about a month, is located in a courtyard that is not accessible to the public. Doors lead to it from the inside of the building. Security cameras keep a watchful eye over the sanctuary and a security fence and gate that is always locked keep strangers out.

Residents like the fact that the play space is safe and private.

"A lot of (older) kids go over to (Birney) park and they get pushed around," said resident Susanna Cardenas, who was pushing daughter Anita Cardenas, 3, on the swings. "Here we can keep an eye on them ... Nobody can get in. They can't get hurt."

Before Mielens died in 2005, she was in the health technology program at the Bay-Arenac ISD Career Center and spent time painting at the mission, helping to get it ready to open, as well as raising money for it as part of a community service project for HOSA, a club for high school students in health careers.

Eight months after her death, two Career Center students, who were also working on a homelessness project, showed up at the mission looking for ways to volunteer, said Dan Streeter, mission director.

They knew Mielens, but didn't really know that they would be picking up where the Bay City Central High

School senior had left off, Streeter said.

Streeter told them about his idea for a playscape in the mission's courtyard so that children would have a place to play.

"Their eyes lit up," Streeter said. "They liked that concept."

In all about \$13,000 was raised for the play area. Of that, about \$8,500 came from a pie sale put on by Career Center students. A large donation for the project was also made by the Bay Area Community Foundation Youth Advisory Council.

And much of the materials and labor were donated, with both Mielens' and VanDenBoom's families pitching in, as well as high school students and other members of the community.

A groundbreaking was held on May 10, 2006, which would have been Mielens' 19th birthday, and in just over one year's time the courtyard was transformed.

Since the Good Samaritan Mission opened in March 2005, more than 700 residents have stayed there. So far this year, the mission has served 344 people. Average occupancy is about 20 people per night, with about seven or eight of them being children.

Initially there were

11 women's rooms that can sleep about 50, not including cribs that can be placed in rooms for young children.

Married couples can stay together in the large family rooms, and a baby was born on Saturday to a couple staying in one of them; She is one of several infants born to mothers living at the mission over the summer.

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